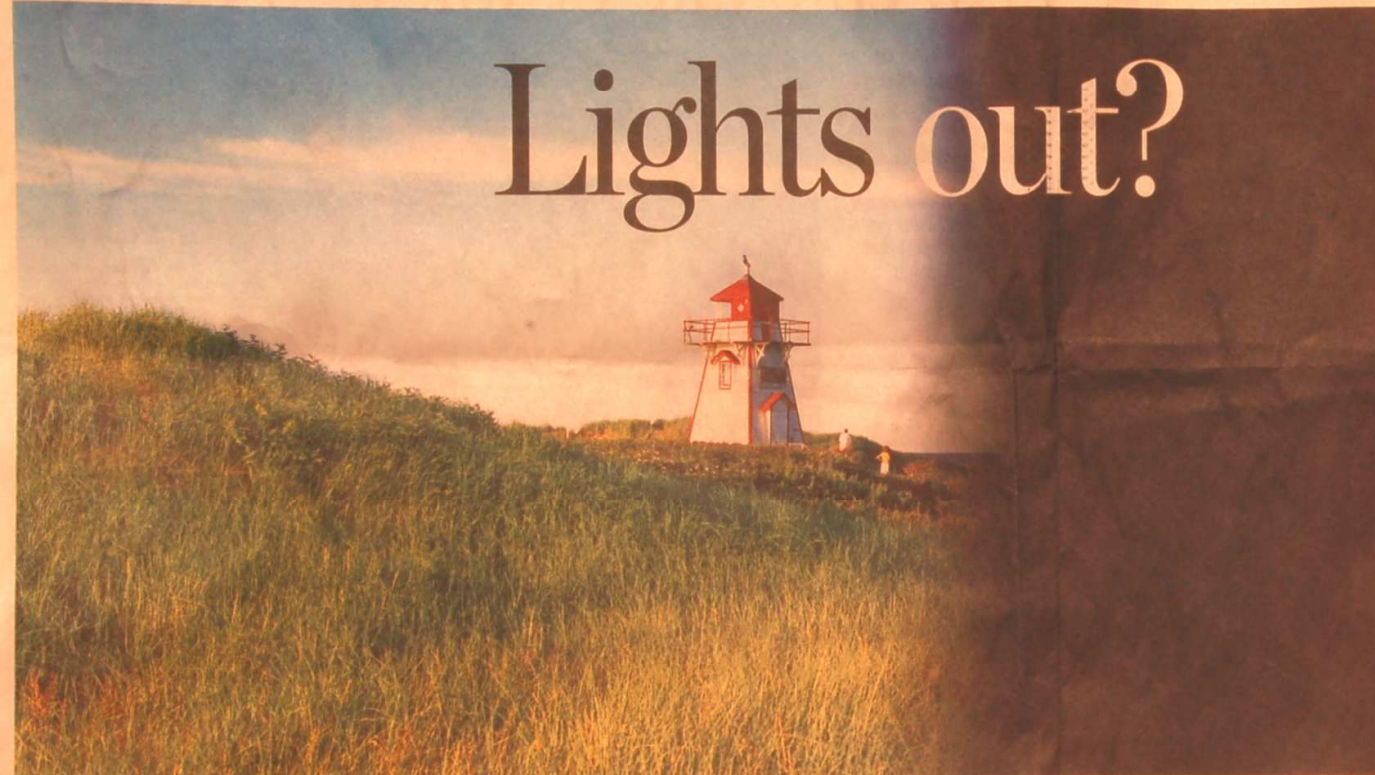


PRESERVATION

Lights out?



Prince Edward Island's Covehead lighthouse, just down the road from Green Gables, is "the heart of the harbour," says Suzanne Bouchard, who had her wedding there in 2008.

PAUL BAGLOLE/TOURISM P.E.I.



A Coast Guard vessel sprays water near Newfoundland's Cape Spear lighthouse, listed as surplus and not yet nominated for a heritage designation.

ANDREW VAUGHAN/CANADIAN PRESS

More than 500 lighthouses are on what preservation advocates call 'The Doomsday List,' faced with being sold off or torn down unless communities step in to save them

ALYSHAH HASHAM
STAFF REPORTER

Since 1967, Covehead lighthouse has been a beacon of hope on the coast of Prince Edward Island.

A plaque on its side is dedicated to the hundreds of lives lost in a surprise 1851 gale, when waves wrecked nearly 100 boats along the then mostly unlit northern coast of the Island.

The worst disaster in the Island's history, it led to the creation of more lighthouses — guiding countless mariners to safety.

But Covehead, directly north of Charlottetown and just down the road from Green Gables, is on what lighthouse preservation advocates call "The Doomsday List." Along with more than 500 others, it is threatened with being sold off or torn down unless communities step in to save it.

"Losing a lighthouse is like losing part of what makes us who we are," said Carol Livingstone, the 69-year-old president of the P.E.I. Lighthouse Preservation Society, fondly known as the "Lighthouse Lady."

"Here in Canada our built history is so young compared to that found in other

parts of the world," she said. "Many of our buildings, especially here on P.E.I., are made of wood. If we don't look after them now, they will not be here for future generations."

Eighteen months ago, the government designated 541 lighthouses across the country as "surplus to operations," and a May deadline looms for communities to bid to take them over so that Ottawa will no longer have to maintain them.

The process starts with "friends" of any lighthouse nominating it for heritage status by May, and then finding someone willing to care for it by 2015.

Those left unclaimed will be sold to the highest bidder or torn down — a consequence that has lighthouse and heritage advocates concerned.

By last month 87 lighthouses out of 541 had been nominated, but only 22 ownership applications had been submitted for consideration.

Covehead lighthouse has a willing foster family led by Keith and Pat Notman, residents of the nearby town of Stanhope.

If they hadn't stepped in, Suzanne Bouchard might have. The lighthouse is

where she had her wedding in 2008. "It's the heart of the harbour," she said. Bouchard and her husband, Lester Gondek, live north of Montreal, but fell in love with P.E.I. and own a vacation house near Covehead.

"I couldn't imagine the island without its lighthouses," she said.

Nova Scotia's famous Peggy's Cove lighthouse may be adopted by the province.

And the Strawberry Island lighthouse and another two around Manitoulin Island in Lake Huron are being taken on by the community.

"These are not peripheral buildings," said Joe Chapman, mayor of Northeastern Manitoulin and the Islands. "They are part of our history... they have been here since the inception of these towns."

Chapman's family goes back eight generations on the island, including some lighthouse keepers — and his story isn't unique.

While the lighthouses are no longer necessary for commercial ships, recreational boaters use them as a comforting landmark in the night, he said.

"We'll do whatever it takes to protect them," said Chapman, adding that with dedicated community care the buildings will be better for it.

But not all of the lighthouses are so lucky.

Take the Sambro lighthouse. It's the oldest working lighthouse in North America,

"Losing a lighthouse is like losing part of what makes us who we are."

CAROL LIVINGSTONE
P.E.I. LIGHTHOUSE PRESERVATION SOCIETY

built in 1758 to guide people into Halifax Harbour, said Barry Macdonald, president of the Nova Scotia Lighthouse Preservation Society. But the 42-metre-tall structure is just too costly for a community group to maintain.

It's one of several iconic lighthouses that haven't made it onto the heritage designation list yet.

Community awareness is another barrier, and Macdonald, with Parks Canada, will travel to Newfoundland and Labrador and New Brunswick in the coming months to rally communities.

Marc Seguin's chosen charges are the three "surplus" lighthouses in Prince Edward County, Ont., including the isolated Main Duck Island lighthouse, a reinforced concrete behemoth at the entrance to the St. Lawrence Seaway.

"No one will be able to afford to take it over," he said. "It will be left to fall down." Still, he is working on a business plan to save the lighthouses, "visual connections to our history."

Macdonald says the federal government should offer to partner with communities to maintain some of the most important lighthouses — though they've told him it's not their mandate to look after heritage buildings.

Indeed, Ottawa has distorted the purpose of the Heritage Lighthouse Protection Act, claims the Heritage Canada Foundation.

"Ironically, the Act was put into place to protect Canadian heritage," said Natalie Bull, executive director of the foundation.

They expected a shortlist of surplus lighthouses to be released for community groups to consider — the list from the department of fisheries and oceans turned out to be near 1,000. It was later cut down to about half that in March.

A Senate report on the implementation of the Act concludes that Canada's historic lighthouses remain at risk, in particular larger lighthouses. It recommends a national lighthouse organization be set up to care for historic lighthouses with funding from the federal government and donations.

In a letter to the Senate, the department of fisheries and oceans said the list is just an extension of the way the department has operated for years. Having communities maintain the historic building, while the Coast Guard looks after the actual navigation light, means the lighthouse won't have to be replaced by a simple, low-cost structure.

Carol Livingstone agrees that community stewardship will serve the lighthouses best.

She led a group to take over their town's West Point lighthouse in the 1990s. It's now a model for other communities, operating as a small inn and museum.

All 47 surplus lighthouses on P.E.I. will also be saved, she believes. Only five heritage applications have been sent in so far, but more are on their way as the urgency kicks in.

"For more than a century, the lighthouses have looked after us as a country. It is now time for us, as the people of this country, to look after our lighthouses."



Suzanne Bouchard and Lester Gondek got married in August 2008 at Covehead lighthouse. "I couldn't imagine the island without its lighthouses," Bouchard says.



A community group took charge of the West Point lighthouse in P.E.I. in the 1990s. It's now a model for other communities, operating as a small inn and museum.



The Strawberry Island lighthouse is being adopted by the Northeastern Manitoulin and Islands community, where it is considered an integral part of history.